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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### Bob Crow and the Politics of Trade Unionism

John McIlroy

Gregor Gall: *Bob Crow, Socialist, Leader, Fighter: A Political Biography*  
Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017

*Bob Crow was an outstanding leader of British trade unionism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. As general secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union, Crow championed industrial militancy. He maximised his position as a public figure to proselytise for public ownership of the railways and criticise the Conservatives, New Labour and the European Union. He opposed austerity and fostered initiatives to regroup the left and create an alternative to the Labour Party. This article develops a critique of a recent biography of Crow written from a Marxist perspective to appraise his career through the prism of Marxist approaches to trade unionism. It analyses Crow's role as a union leader and explores his political projects such as No2EU and the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition. His contribution is assessed in relation to contemporary issues such as Brexit and the resurgence of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn. The article concludes that measured against a Marxist template, Crow was closer to Lenin's 'trade union leader' than his 'tribune of the people'. Despite his industrial achievements, he remained within the framework of the militant trade unionism and left reformism he absorbed during his formative years, rather than an advocate of class politics and revolutionary socialism.*

Keywords: *Bob Crow; Trade Unions; Rail, Maritime and Transport Union; Labour Party; Communist Party; Socialist Party; No2EU; Trade Union and Socialist Coalition*

#### Introducing Bob Crow

Few Marxists have attained high office in British trade unions and fewer have successfully utilised their positions to contribute to the advance of revolutionary socialism. Constrained by their role as managers of sectional, economic interest groups, bargaining over the sale of labour power with consequent pressures from capital and the state, most came to internalise and live by the market logic of haggling over the price of exploitation with its inevitable compromises. The divide between the industrial and political spheres, and the primacy of the former was accepted in practice. Foundation members of the Communist Party (CPGB),

Robert Williams of the Transport Workers and Alf Purcell of the Furnishing Trades parted company with it rather than observe its policy in their unions. Tom Mann remained a loyal Communist until his death, although his trade union triumphs were behind him when he became general secretary of the Engineers' Union in 1920.<sup>1</sup> A. J. Cook, who left the CPGB in 1921, continued to pursue industrial militancy and socialist agitation outside the party, until retreat was forced upon him during the 1926 General Strike. Jack Tanner, who defected around the same time, followed a similar path before moving to the right after his election as president of Engineers in 1939.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1930s, the party changed: the CPGB followed former members in conciliating economism, privileging trade unionism and gravitating towards officialdom.<sup>3</sup> Arthur Horner, a model revolutionary socialist trade unionist in the 1920s, pioneered this path through the ensuing decade. His election as general secretary of the Mineworkers' Union saw him champion collaboration with the National Coal Board, crusade against strikes as betraying the national interest and demand increased productivity. His itinerary was emulated

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<sup>1</sup> For Williams, Purcell and the Communist Party (CPGB) see James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Vol. I, Formation and Early Years, 1919-1924* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), pp.40-41, 83-84, 95, 109. For Mann, see, Joe White, *Tom Mann* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Davies, *A. J. Cook* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), is an excellent biography which conveys a vivid sense of the situational and personal stress socialist trade union leaders experienced in the 1920s. For Tanner, see Nina Fishman, 'Tanner, Frederick John Shirley (Jack) (1889-1865)' in Keith Gildart, David Howell and Neville Kirk (eds) *Dictionary of Labour Biography Volume XI* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp.274-283. For general reflections on these problems, see Stephen McBride, 'Trade Union Leadership in Capitalist Society', *Studies in History and Politics*, 5 (1986), pp.10-12.

<sup>3</sup> For different views on this, see, Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), particularly pp.110-129, 172-187; Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-45* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995); John McIlroy, 'Restoring Stalinism to Communist History', *Critique* 41: 4 (2003), pp.599-622.

by his successor and fellow party member, Will Paynter.<sup>4</sup> During the post-war era, Communists were frequently at the forefront of the trade union struggle. They included the Civil Servants' leader, Len White; John Horner of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU); Jim Gardner of the Foundry Workers; George Guy of the Sheet Metal Workers' Union; and Ken Gill from the Engineering Union's Technical and Supervisory Section.<sup>5</sup> Miners' leaders such as Arthur Scargill and Mick McGahey reflected a spirit of intransigent resistance to capitalism and determination to confront the state. Like their comrades, they were unable to go beyond left reformism.<sup>6</sup> These officials operated in a mixture of favourable and unfavourable economic and political circumstances, in a variety of industrial contexts and oscillating power balances between capital and labour. None of them encountered a pre-revolutionary situation or a mass movement developing in that direction. But they only sporadically bent their efforts to augment the forces convinced of its necessity. Most lacked the guidance of a revolutionary party – still less one rooted in the unions, Parliament and civil society. None made its creation their priority. None transcended the role of a 'trade union

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<sup>4</sup> Nina Fishman, *Arthur Horner: A Political Biography*, 2 vols (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010); McIlroy, 'Restoring Stalinism to Communist History', op cit., particularly pp.613-622; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'Coalfield Leaders, Trade Unionism and Communist Politics: Exploring Arthur Horner and Abe Moffat' in Stefan Berger, Andy Croll and Norman Laporte (eds), *Towards a Comparative History of Coalfield Societies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp.267-283.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Stevens, 'Cold War Politics: Communism and Anti-Communism' in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds) *The Post-War Compromise: British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, 1945-64* (2nd ed, Monmouth, Merlin Press, 2007), pp.168-191; John McIlroy, 'Notes on the Communist Party and Industrial Politics' in John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell (eds) *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism: Trade Unions and Industrial Politics, 1964-79* (2nd ed, Monmouth, Merlin Press, 2007), pp.216-258.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Michael Crick, *Scargill and the Miners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); Seamus Milne, *The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners* (London: Verso, 1994); John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'McGahey, Michael (Mick) (1925-1999)' in Keith Gildart and David Howell (eds) *Dictionary of Labour Biography vol. XIII* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.242-251.

leader'; none became in Lenin's terms a 'tribune of the people'.<sup>7</sup> Bob Crow, who was general secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) from 2002 until his death in 2014, was only among the most recent in a line of trade union leaders who aspired to represent workers within capitalism and secure their emancipation through its supercession. One of the purposes of this essay is to inquire whether Crow was any more successful than his predecessors.

Crow was born in 1961 in East London and raised in Hainault, Essex, the son of a docker who was a staunch trade unionist, and a housewife who became a part-time cleaner. He left school at 16 in 1979 – the year Margaret Thatcher unleashed the neoliberal counter-reformation in Britain – to work on the London Underground and join the National Union of Railwaymen (subsequently the RMT). In the early-1980s, he was a local union representative, branch committee member, delegate to conference and, a little later, a fixture on the RMT's national executive. He emerged as a militant rank and file leader on the London Underground and became well-known in union circles beyond it. Crow was elected assistant general secretary (AGS) in 1994 and again in 1999.<sup>8</sup>

He recollected the influence that his father and the powerful trade unionism of the 1970s had exercised on his commitment. Crow joined a movement with almost 13 million members at a time when 55 per cent of employees were trade unionists. In 1980, the NUR had 170,000 members and, to all intents and purposes, a secure base in a nationalised industry. Full employment, rising living standards and a state protective of organised labour needed defending; they still seemed permanent aspects of the post-war landscape.<sup>9</sup> Crow was

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<sup>7</sup> N. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* in Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), pp.246-247.

<sup>8</sup> This and the succeeding paragraphs are based, unless otherwise stated, on the book under review, Gregor Gall, *Bob Crow, Socialist, Fighter, Leader: A Political Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> For trade unionism in the 1970s and early 1980s see Robert Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics: Government and Unions since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

formed in a context of enforced change which exposed underlying fragilities in organised labour. Orchestrated by the state, the assault on the 1945 settlement stimulated union resistance, but accomplished their ultimate defeat. By the time he became AGS in 1994, RMT membership had fallen to 67,981 and would decline further to 55,000 by the turn of the century. At which point, overall union membership had dropped below 8 million. Fewer than a third of workers were trade unionists and privatisation was creeping across the nationalised sector and the public utilities.<sup>10</sup>

In 1983, when he was 22, Crow enrolled in the CPGB, then in the throes of decline. Its union base was crumbling and the party was gripped by factionalism.<sup>11</sup> Like many industrial activists, Crow aligned himself with the ‘Stalinist’ wing around the *Morning Star* newspaper. When the CPGB dissolved in 1991, he joined the rump Communist Party of Britain (CPB). Active in the NUR through the 1980s, the battle against restructuring and redundancies on the underground proved a key experience. He supported the Communist-backed Broad Left, kept his distance from the harder-edged Campaign for a Fighting and Democratic Union and enjoyed good relations with a range of militants, including the cohort of Trotskyist ‘colonists’. More than many Communists, he was critical of the Labour Party. With the advent of Tony Blair, Crow decamped from the CPB with a group of RMT officials. They joined the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) launched by Arthur Scargill after New Labour’s revision of Clause 4. His stay was short: he quit the new party as Scargill’s authoritarian tendencies and serial expulsions provoked resignations and decline.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John McIlroy, *Trade Unions in Britain Today* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Gary Daniels and John McIlroy (eds) *Trade Unions in a Neoliberal World: British Trade Unions Under New Labour* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Geoff Andrews, *Endgames and New Times: The Final Years of British Communism 1964-1991* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2004), pp.178-223.

<sup>12</sup> For industrial relations on the railways see, for example, Andrew Pendleton, ‘The Evolution of Industrial Relations in UK Nationalised Industries’, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 35:2 (1997), pp.145-172;

By the time he was elected general secretary of the RMT in 2002, Crow was a confirmed but pragmatic militant in the Communist mould. He had no qualms about advocating industrial action when it was practicable and carried the prospect of success. But he was a flexible negotiator willing to settle on what he considered reasonable terms. He refused to take on a fight he believed the RMT could not win by breaking the Conservative government's employment legislation. In that context, he argued for action over concrete issues – whether wages, conditions, safety or victimisation – rather than privatisation or contracting-out. Crow had his critics and his supporters were disappointed by his rejection of proposals that he stand against his predecessor in the union's top job, Jimmy Knapp.

In office on Knapp's death, Crow enjoyed the advantage, not always afforded militants, of a favourable environment. The industry was expanding, demand was growing and there were labour shortages. Companies providing integrated 'perishable' services and bent on restructuring and downward pressure on wages and conditions were vulnerable to industrial action in a highly-unionised sector. Employers faced a range of pressures from shareholders, customers, workers and the state. Amplification of discontent by the RMT maximised its bargaining power. The union sought, with some success, to identify militancy with the public interest, and the employers with profiteering and incompetence. Renationalisation of the railways became increasingly popular. Despite court rulings prohibiting strikes, Crow became adept at working within the law, and using strike votes as leverage in negotiations. Improvements in pay and conditions were consequently credited by members to the union - with further enhancement of bargaining power and a willingness to use it.

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Ralph Darlington, 'Leadership and Union Militancy: The Case of the RMT', *Capital and Class*, 33:3 (2009), pp.3-32; Heather Connolly and Ralph Darlington, 'Radical Political Unionism in France and Britain: A Comparative Study of SUD-Rail and the RMT', *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 18:3 (2012), pp.235-250.

Returned unopposed in 2006, Crow proved an able administrator and strategist. He strengthened workplace organisation, increased RMT membership and extended union education. Initially treated by the establishment and media as a replacement for Scargill as a trade union hate figure – although he never led a mass strike or faced the challenges and onslaught that Scargill endured – there was some mellowing. Hostility towards Crow as an architect of disruption and accusations of champagne socialism, cronyism and nepotism never quite went away. Sections of the public were more sympathetic to his image as the common man, an honest, outspoken and unpretentious Londoner who enjoyed family life, beer and Millwall FC. Some managers depicted him as a moderate – at least in comparison with other RMT activists. Fellow union leaders who on several occasions kept him off the TUC general council were not so sure.

As disenchantment with New Labour deepened among the left and ‘The Awkward Squad’, a group of union leaders disillusioned with government policy emerged, Crow began to look for political alternatives.<sup>13</sup> In 2003, the union permitted branches to affiliate to parties other than Labour, in the knowledge that if acted upon this would breach Labour Party rules. Permission was granted for RMT branches to affiliate to the small Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). Labour’s national executive responded by disaffiliating the RMT from the Labour Party. Crow began to explore, cautiously in view of his experience with the SLP, the possibilities of a new socialist party. There were few takers in terms of what would be realistically required – a significant secession of sections of the workers from Labour and the unions. The small groups to the left of the Labour were another matter.

Crow had maintained links with activists in the CPB, itself divided between a majority who professed critical support for Labour, and those interested in piloting an alternative to it. He also came into contact with the Trotskyist Socialist Party (SP), the

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Murray, *A New Labour Nightmare: The Return of the Awkward Squad* (London: Verso, 2003).



successor of the entrust *Militant* tendency, which after its expulsion had written off Labour. The SP exercised influence in a number of small unions, such as the Bakers' Union and the Prison Officers' Association (POA) and dominated the larger Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). By 2007, Crow was speaking at meetings of the SP-sponsored Campaign for a New Workers Party. In 2008, he collaborated with the SP to found the National Shop Stewards' Network (NSSN) to bring together lay representatives across the unions. It was the CPB, however, which provided the political ballast for No2EU – Yes to Democracy. Presaging Brexit, he had already called on the TUC to campaign for a referendum on Britain's EU membership and support a vote for withdrawal, 'to regain control of the British economy'. With the CPB, he believed that the EU was a 'bosses club'; it had spearheaded neoliberalism and constituted a bureaucratic barrier to socialist renewal.

No2EU was followed by a broader project – the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition which would stand candidates in general elections and local government contests. Disregarding the lack of support from Labour Party circles and the mass of union members, Crow pushed ahead in partnership with the SP, whose members and activists provided most of the foot-soldiers. Other groups, notably the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), also came on board a political platform centred on extending public ownership, democratising public services, repealing the Conservative employment legislation and securing an independent foreign policy. Despite attracting officials and activists from the PCS, FBU and POA, the problems were underlined when the RMT declined to officially endorse TUSC in the 2010 general election. Like its predecessor, the coalition failed to exceed 1 per cent of the vote in the 2010 and 2015 general elections.

***Bob Crow, Socialist, Leader, Fighter***

Bob Crow's death provoked a wave of tributes, typically celebrating the man and his qualities rather than his ideas and activities, often from those who opposed most of what he stood for. Critical appraisal of this self-styled 'communist/socialist' (p.147) is overdue.<sup>14</sup> Interrogation of Crow's career may help to clarify contemporary problems. It may shed light on current struggles in the Labour Party and the unions, the left's attitude to Brexit, and how Marxists understand the relationship between trade unionism and politics. The task is facilitated by a timely text, Gregor Gall's *Bob Crow: Socialist, Leader, Fighter: A Political Biography*. Gall has performed a valuable service by bringing together a range of material on Crow's life. He has explored the academic literature to provide the most detailed account we have of trade unionism on the railways over the last quarter of a century. The book seems particularly useful as it starts from the premise that '...critical Marxism is an appropriate tool by which to study him'. The aim is: '...to identify the wider lessons that emerge for workers and unions from studying Crow as a leader, fighter and socialist' (p.2). This is 'a political biography' and Gall makes his *political* purpose explicit. He is centrally concerned with '...how unions can rebuild their power...so that they can prosecute members' material (primarily economic) interests in *the direction of socialist change*' (p.2, emphasis added). But the text is not without its problems. These relate to the critical apparatus Gall employs and how it is applied to assess Crow. This essay therefore combines a critique of the book as a contribution to Marxist analysis, with my own evaluation of Crow's career.

A preliminary issue is Gall's research strategy: the sources he has employed to reconstruct Crow are restricted. The RMT leadership observed the wishes of his family and refused to cooperate in a biography they had not commissioned. In consequence, this volume too often relies on media reports. It draws heavily on Crow's radio and television appearances and interviews and coverage of events in *The Times* and *Guardian*, as well as the

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<sup>14</sup> Page references in brackets through the rest of my text refer to Gall's book.

*Evening Standard*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*, which were generally hostile to Crow and to effective trade unionism. Judicious use of reportage can be productive, although corroboration may be necessary.<sup>15</sup> However, the media are preoccupied with the ‘newsworthy’ and interviewees may be inclined or tempted to perform and play to the gallery. This can produce, particularly with controversial figures, an unbalanced picture. For example, when he was asked: “Do you often discuss Marxism?” [Crow] responded “No, this happens only when [I see] journalists” (p.150). His response may be truthful or it may be sarcastic – the implications of each are different.<sup>16</sup>

Gall has gathered “Testimonies” from RMT colleagues who worked with Crow. When quoted they substantially consist of tributes, although some contain insights. What is missing is any significant use of extended interviews with key union players, as well as deployment of internal union documents, reports, minutes and correspondence.<sup>17</sup> Carefully studied, such primary materials can illuminate actors, issues and decision-making and provide an authoritative corrective to press coverage.<sup>18</sup> More understandable is the absence of

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<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing, the *Daily Mail* has been listed by Wikipedia as an unreliable source. The far left press is also used for strike reports. Experience suggests the need for checking details, while the *Morning Star* takes an uncritical attitude towards many union leaders.

<sup>16</sup> If we take Crow’s comment literally it raises questions about the extent to which he argued politics directly with his members and used disputes and strikes as an occasion to develop socialist ideas with participants; or alternatively, acted out his Marxism as platform rhetoric and ‘Socialism for Sundays’.

<sup>17</sup> While Gall notes the lack of cooperation from the RMT, reports of the annual Trade Union Congress, to take an example, are published and readily available. However, *The Times* and *Telegraph* are used for Crow’s speeches at Congress (p.82, notes 6, 7).

<sup>18</sup> Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Vol. One: Trade Union Leader, 1881-1940* (London: Heinemann, 1960) is a classic example of the value of internal and personal documentation. Bullock had full access and freedom to write an independent study with the blessing of Bevin’s successor Arthur Deakin – *ibid.*, p.xii.

authorial observation of Crow and other key protagonists at work.<sup>19</sup> Little new light is shed on the intricacies of Crow's political activities and important movers in No2EU and TUSC, such as Brian Denny, Clive Heemskerk and Dave Nellist, have not been interviewed.

A notable absence is the voice of 'ordinary' union members. This is not uncommon in the academic literature on industrial relations and trade unions. The focus is predominantly on leaders and activists; members frequently feature as an audience or statistics. For Marxists, 'ordinary' members are not foot soldiers or cannon fodder; they are, in the end, the decisive actors. It is more than half a century since Raymond Williams insisted that 'the masses' be deleted and flesh and blood human beings reinstated in socialist narratives. Gall acknowledges members' importance to the critical Marxism through which he intends to study Crow: 'three aspects are to the fore in examining Crow, namely material interests (of his members and himself), ideology (his and his members' world views) and power resources (of his members and himself)' (p.8). Gall's investigation aspires 'to understand sociologically how and why [Crow] was able to make the contribution he did, on the basis of the interrelationship between himself and the RMT members' (p.2). Towards the end of the book, the author claims '...this study of Crow has been set within two central relationships under capitalism – namely capital-labour and leader-follower, where a dialectical materialist approach has been used to understand their intra and interactions' (p.231).

However, the emphasis in the preceding two hundred pages falls almost entirely on leaders and activists, to the exclusion, in any specific disaggregated fashion, of the voice of the 'follower'. There are no interviews probing what diverse RMT members think about the economy, unions, strikes or politics; how they see the world and Crow; and why so many of them remain inactive. Time-consuming as it is, more should be done in this direction. For

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<sup>19</sup> V. L. Allen, *Trade Union Leadership: Based on a Study of Arthur Deakin* (London: Longmans Green, 1957), benefitted from the availability of both union documents and the opportunity Allen was given to observe Deakin at work – *ibid.*, pp.v-vi.

these are questions crucial to Gall's interpretative scheme and fundamental to any evaluation of what Crow achieved, the degree to which union members shared his politics and whether Crow succeeded in 'taking the RMT in a socialist direction'. Leaders at all levels are central to working class organisation and action. We are unlikely to attain satisfactory understanding of the interaction between leaders and members if the latter figure in the text only as a sometimes responsive, sometimes recalcitrant, typically anonymous mass. We are in danger of learning more about leaders than leadership and gaining a one-sided understanding of militancy, mobilisation and political developments.

There are further difficulties with the framework Gall adumbrates for analysing Crow. He expounds his approach as follows:

The key components deployed are 1) dialectical materialism, whereby the formative influence of syntheses of agency and environment, individual and collective, and ideas and actions are accorded prominence as a means of understanding social processes and outcomes (albeit with materialist concerns forming the foundation upon which the approach rests); and 2) a holistic form of political economy where politics and economics are held to be different but indivisible parts of society. This entails giving prominence to the influence of capitalism, the capitalist (neoliberal) state, and the struggle between capital and labour (p.8).

'This critical Marxist approach', we are told, 'also facilitates an analytical framework to consider how Crow was shaped by the RMT *and* helped to shape the RMT' (p.8). Crow's interaction with his members, is expressed in terms of the material interests, ideology and power resources of Crow, on the one hand, and of his members on the other (p.8 see quotes above). For Gall: 'These three aspects provide the conceptual categories by which a critical Marxist analysis is constructed and which productively anchors the person, politics and potential power of members' (p.8). These and similarly general, aspirational comments are unrevealing as to directly pertinent features of a critical Marxist analysis of *trade unionism* and *trade unionists*. In a book centred on Crow and trade unionism there is much talk of agency and environment, holistic forms of political economy, ideology and power resources

and the struggle between capital and labour. There is no explanation of how Marxists have conceived the role and functions of a union like the RMT, its leaders and its members. Gall is similarly unforthcoming about other relevant components of a critical Marxist approach to his subject and his context, the relationship of trade union activity to class consciousness, the role of strikes in socialist progress and the relationship of trade unions to the revolutionary party.

The section entitled 'Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches' (pp.8-11), is silent on such matters. Instead, readers are referred to contributions by industrial relations academics (pp. 9-11). Insightful as far as they go, but substantially confined to trade unionism *per se*, these do not explore, still less attempt to explain, the relationship between trade unionism and socialist politics. Kelly's essay on industrial militancy, for example, hardly attributes, as Gall insists it does, 'ambitious...political goals' (p.9) to such militancy. Like 'mobilisation theory', this work is essentially about the conduct of labour relations in capitalist society. It does not address important issues at the heart of Marxist theorising about trade unionism or Gall's concern with unions prosecuting 'members' interests in the direction of socialist change' (p.2).<sup>20</sup>

The initial absence of any grounded, furnished elaboration of what a Marxist approach to analysing trade unionism involves would be more understandable if explication was embedded in the text and introduced when pertinent to particular aspects of Crow's career. As we shall demonstrate in due course, Gall does touch on several key issues in Marxist theory. But he usually does this in perfunctory fashion. Sometimes he refers,

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<sup>20</sup> John Kelly, 'Union Militancy and Social Partnership' in Peter Ackers, Chris Smith and Paul Smith (eds), *The New Workplace and Trade Unions: Critical Perspectives on Work and Organisation* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.77-109; John Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* (London: Routledge, 1998). Mobilisation theory was developed within a Marxist framework: Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978). As the title of his text and the essays in it on mobilisation theory suggest, Kelly applies the theory to industrial relations and, more particularly, to trade union struggle and the generation of workers' interests in capitalism. I deal with the other main theory Gall espouses, 'political congruence', later in this essay.

parsimoniously to the secondary literature (see, for example, p.151). In what is a lengthy study, the sole reference to the Marxist canon, critical or otherwise, comes from Crow himself (p.150). In several instances, where Marxists will find Crow's behaviour questionable or controversial, Gall passes over it without critical comment in a fashion more consonant with value free social science than critical Marxism (see p.63, 88, 134-135).

### **Marxism and Trade Unions: A Short Excursus**

In view of these weaknesses it may be helpful to outline the bones of a Marxist analysis of trade unionism and politics which will help us evaluate both Crow and Gall's study of Crow. Qualifications applicable to Marxism in general apply here. There is no straightforward, settled Marxist theory of trade unionism. The writings of the classic Marxists, subsisting within wider economic, social and political analysis, reveal silences, ambiguities and contradictions – as well as compelling insights. Similar judgments may be applied to the secondary literature which is sometimes enriched by non-Marxist thinking. It is possible, nonetheless, to delineate some of the key ideas which animate Marxist perspectives.

- **Trade Unions Under British Capitalism:** Many countries have produced revolutionary unions linked to revolutionary parties. At certain stages unions, as Gramsci noted, are fluid organisations and their goals are imprinted by human actors. Marx and Engels pondered whether 19<sup>th</sup> century British unions might assume a revolutionary mission.<sup>21</sup> They evolved as reformist institutions, partially healing atomisation and softening exploitation by organising workers on an occupational or sectoral basis in modulated antagonism to capital. Unions cultivate a limited sense of collective identity and solidarity. Indispensable to protect workers, they organise the sale of labour power. Mobilising to create a market for it, they

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<sup>21</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From Political Writings, 1910-1920* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p.265; Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Panther Books, 1969), pp.250-251; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002).

legitimate exploitation, establish and maintain ‘industrial legality’ and institutionalise conflict between workers and capital. They, thus, articulate, defend and extend workers’ interests under capitalism; but they marginalise the class interest in replacing it. Anderson concluded: ‘All mature socialist theory since Lenin has started by stressing the insurmountable limitations of trade union action in capitalist society’.<sup>22</sup> Those who in periods of militancy have creatively explored Marx’s more optimistic scenario have typically returned to this orthodoxy.<sup>23</sup>

- **Bureaucratic Organisations or A Bureaucratic Stratum?** Unions are democratic organisations, sometimes with formally radical goals. Over time, the latter have been displaced. The priority accorded processing members’ material interests through collective bargaining produces adaptation to conventional principles of administration and, management and attenuation of democracy. In a real but restricted sense, unions became bureaucratic bodies which operate within capitalist law and invest in capitalist companies. The classic Marxists viewed bureaucracy as the property of the apparatus. It posited a cleavage between a stratum of officials imposing reactionary goals on unions, with bureaucrats’ conservatism reinforced by pressure from capital and the state; and a rank and file whose direct experience of exploitation rendered them susceptible to radicalisation.<sup>24</sup> More nuanced approaches observed differentiation within both categories and suggested that conservatism might be counteracted by pressure from members. More fundamentally, it has been argued that bureaucracy cannot simply be identified with officialdom but constitutes a social relation

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<sup>22</sup> Perry Anderson, ‘The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action’ in Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn (eds) *The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p.263).

<sup>23</sup> Richard Hyman, *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* (London: Pluto Press, 1971) poses the possibility of optimistic scenarios in a way subdued in his later work.

<sup>24</sup> For recent discussion, see, John Mellroy, ‘Marxism and the Trade Unions: The Bureaucracy and the Rank and File Debate Revisited’, *Critique*, 42:4 (2014), pp.497-526.



permeating trade unionism at all levels. The role of officials remains problematic; the primary issue is the accommodative nature of trade unions themselves.<sup>25</sup> Others dissatisfied with the bureaucracy – rank and file dichotomy, have largely dispensed with structural explanations and asserted that intra-union conflict stems fundamentally from values and politics.<sup>26</sup>

- **Trade Union Consciousness and Class Consciousness:** Acculturating workers to negotiating with capital, unions validate capital and capitalism. Trade union consciousness reproduces the conviction that it is imperative to combine against employers to ameliorate exploitation. Class consciousness, in contrast, embodies the understanding that employers are part of a class of exploiters which dominates society, while trade unionists are part of a class which is exploited. It is imperative to combine to eliminate exploitation, rather than negotiate over its symptoms, and proceed to construct a communist society. Trade union consciousness accepts and affirms the disabling bifurcation between the economic and political spheres imposed by capitalism. Unions are products and protagonists of the former. Trade union politics, based on alignment with a reformist party, like Labour, which represents their interests in Parliament, remains anchored in the economic arena. Class consciousness acknowledges no such divide. It demands and develops the unity of economic and political activity in a transformative project directed by a revolutionary party. Trade unionism and trade union politics coheres only ‘a class in itself’. Revolutionary activity creates ‘a class for itself’. How workers move from trade union politics and allegiance to the Labour Party to revolutionary politics and allegiance to a revolutionary party has fuelled extensive debate.

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<sup>25</sup> The classic statement is Richard Hyman, ‘The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and some Problems for Theory’, *Capital and Class*, 8 (1979).

<sup>26</sup> John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics* (London: Verso, 1988), pp.149-183; John Kelly and Edmund Heery, *Working For the Union: British Trade Union Officers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.193-203.

Lenin characterised Labour as a ‘bourgeois workers’ party’ – but insisted Marxists work within it with no illusions in order to assemble the forces for a revolutionary party.<sup>27</sup>

- **Strikes and Marxism:** Unions represent a blend of organisation and mobilisation: members’ willingness to act is essential to collective bargaining, power and institutional success and survival. Strikes are, thus instruments of conventional trade unionism. The early Marx and Engels as well as Lenin, considered strikes a means of habituating workers to collectivism, strengthening organisation and building confidence. They could, however, stimulate awareness of capitalism, expand understanding of the role of the state and school workers in the need for revolution.<sup>28</sup> A distinction has sometimes been drawn between sectional strikes, which have limited impact on consciousness and mass strikes which cut across sectional boundaries. Stress has been placed on the consciousness-raising implications of mass strikes from below – as distinct from strikes initiated and controlled by officialdom. Distinctions, sometimes blurred, are made between mass strikes occurring in conditions of relative normality; and those mounted in conditions of political and social turmoil. Some Marxists have been sceptical of strikes generating revolutionary awareness outside crisis conditions. Others have asserted they can contribute to moving towards such conditions and provoke a pre-revolutionary situation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-philosophy>; Gramsci, ‘What Is to Be Done?’, pp.149-151, in Gramsci op cit; Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, op cit., pp.700-762; Karl Marx, *Wages, Price and Profit* in Marx, Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), pp.225-226; V. I. Lenin, “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1970).

<sup>28</sup> Engels, op cit., pp.250-251; Lenin, ‘On Strikes’, in Lenin, *Collected Works, Vol. 4* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), pp.310-319.

<sup>29</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (New York, Harper and Row, 1967); John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, op cit., pp.85-127; Sheila Cohen and Kim Moody, ‘Strikes and Class Consciousness’ in Colin Leys and Leo Panitch (eds), *Socialist Register 1998* (London: Merlin Press, 1998); John Mellroy, ‘Strikes and Class Consciousness in the Early Work of Richard Hyman’, *Capital and Class*, 36: 1 (2011), pp.53-75.

- **The Revolutionary Party:** These issues are related to argument about the distance between trade union consciousness and revolutionary political consciousness and the degree to which the gap can be closed through ‘spontaneous’ struggle or demands the intervention of a revolutionary party. Most Marxists have concurred with Lenin who posited a gulf, rather than a continuum, between those forms of consciousness. Following Kautsky and Lenin, they have argued that class consciousness demands engagement with revolutionary theory, developed by intellectuals, and its custodian and pedagogue, the revolutionary party. Organising class conscious sections of workers; independent of other parties; intervening across society; challenging oppression in all sectors and classes, and maintaining a continuous dialogue with the broader working class, the party supplies dialogic leadership within capitalism and directs its dissolution. Most of its advocates have insisted on democratic centralism based on the military model adopted by the Bolsheviks during the civil war. Others have argued for a greater stress on democracy, drawing on the experience of the Bolsheviks before 1917 and the pre-war German Social Democracy. Opinions differ as to how parties should be built in contemporary conditions. Some favour starting with a broad party which enrolls revolutionaries *and* reformists. Others insist on a Marxist programme *ab initio*.<sup>30</sup>

- **Marxism and Action:** Theory is a concomitant of action. Marxists utilise every incident in workplace, union and society to illustrate the antagonism between exploiters and the exploited, press for improvements in employment conditions, extend militancy and disseminate socialist ideas. Revitalising trade unions demands, *inter alia*, rebuilding workplace organisation articulated with democratised union structures; regular election of officials on salaries which reflect workers’ wages; democratising the TUC on similar lines;

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<sup>30</sup> Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, op cit., pp.763-840; Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, op cit.; Idem, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993); Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880-1938* (London: Verso, 1990).

extending and democratising links with the Labour Party; campaigning for favourable legislation; and resisting integration of unions with employers and the state. Making socialists out of militants demands address of such issues but insistence on the centrality of 'high politics', from questions of the constitution and civil liberties to imperialism and foreign policy. Challenging the commonsense of trade unionism may also entail questioning conventions of socialist trade unionism which can be more trade unionist than socialist. It is still possible, for example, to witness militants suppressing their politics, in the alleged interest of establishing 'credibility' over 'bread and butter' union issues, activists who adulterate their political allegiance in union literature, and full-time officers who decline to employ their office as a platform for socialist ideas.

The foregoing constitutes a simplified sketch with many of the arguments, nuances and problems left out and will undoubtedly provoke qualifications, additions and disagreements. Marxist ideas are difficult to even begin to implement, particularly in the current conjuncture and many of these problems are far from easily resolved. As history has demonstrated, practising Marxism is never easy and this outline may provide some basis on which to discuss the role of a 'communist-socialist' trade unionist in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Bob Crow: Political Formation, Strikes and Trade Unionism**

Detailed excavation of the factors governing the formation of the subject is indispensable to successful biography. With regard to radicals and revolutionaries, the issues have been explored by historians and sociologists.<sup>31</sup> Gall's approach is unreflective. His section on

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the two seminal chapters on the sociology of individuals in Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp.227-299; Paul O'Brien, 'Is Political Biography A Good Thing?', *Contemporary British History*, 10:4 (1996), pp.60-66; McBride, 'Trade Union Leadership', op cit.; Harry Knowles, 'Trade Union Leadership: Biography and the Role of Historical Context', *Leadership*, 3:2 (2007), pp.191-209. We may also learn something about evidence, technique, interpretation, empathy, critical

‘Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches’ contains no reference to the problematic nature of biography, and neither citation nor discussion of the relevant literature.<sup>32</sup> This extends to research in industrial relations which offers generational analysis as a tool for addressing the formation of union officers and leaders. This work focuses, a little controversially, on the enduring impact on their future values and actions of the ethos of the times and the economic, political and social circumstances prevailing at the point when officers entered the labour market or, alternatively, were inducted into activism.<sup>33</sup> Gall does mention the impact on Crow of ‘...growing up when unions were significant factors’ and Crow’s own reference to the union leaders of the 1970s (pp.26-27). But he emphasises the influence on Crow’s development of his childhood and particularly his father. In contrast, hardly anything at all is said about the impact of his education. A general drawback with Gall’s reconstruction of his subject’s early life is that it is substantially based on Crow’s own recollections in press interviews and reports: a protagonist’s memories filtered through the media are not invariably reliable and rarely constitute a sufficient basis for rigorous biography.<sup>34</sup>

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distance and much else from other genres of biography: see, for example, Richard Holmes, *The Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Pantheon, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> There is no reference to other, well-known biographies of trade union leaders – see notes 18, 19, above. Gall observes of unnamed biographies of left-wing union leaders: ‘... few are able to explain why the individual was able to do what they did and why their actions resounded as they did’ (p.2). No examples are given. But this judgement is questionable in relation to work such as Davies, *A.J. Cook*, op.cit; Geoffrey Goodman, *The Awkward Warrior: Frank Cousins, His Life and Times* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Nottingham: Spokesman, 1979); and Fishman, *Arthur Horner*, op.cit.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Phelps Brown, *The Origins of Trade Union Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp.216-217; J. E. Cronin, *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp.64-66; Kelly and Heery, op cit., pp.200-202; John McIlroy, ‘Still under Siege: British Trade Unions at the Turn of the Century’, *Historical Studies of Industrial Relations*, 3, March 1997, pp.117-120.

<sup>34</sup> Excluding Crow’s own memories, the only testimony about his childhood comes from his brother, who, in an example of the complexities of family life, escaped Bob’s socialisation and became an admirer of Margaret Thatcher, interviewed in the *Daily Mail*. In the absence of evidence, Gall speculates: ‘It is highly likely that his father also informed him of the East End struggles of the matchgirls and dockers in the 1880s, the 1936 Battle of

Despite his father's positive views predisposing him towards trade unionism, in Crow's memory it required an incident in which he felt picked on at work to lead him towards activism. Gall records this episode in 1980 and Crow's later enrolment in the CPGB in 1983 as part of a section headed 'Political Epiphany' (p.19). Neither incident would appear to qualify for that appellation as neither appears to have turned on a moment of unexpected and profound revelation. In the context of the tutelage in trade unionism Crow had received at home, his recognition that bosses could behave arbitrarily seems more prosaic than Pauline, and 'political' only in the artificially expanded sense of the term that Gall periodically employs throughout this book. It was a further three years before he embraced Communist politics. No evidence is presented to suggest that he was prompted to join the CPGB by a sudden flash of recognition that this was his preordained destination, rather than a gradual process of assimilation.

Acts of conversion figure prominently in Communist biographies, but Crow, as cited by Gall, only mentions the veteran CPGB railway worker, Jock Nicolson as a specific influence. Gall conjectures further that an unhappy experience at a Labour Party school and his father's influence were important in motivating Crow's decision to join (p.22). Such factors are relevant but in themselves insufficient, unless we also emphasise the element of agency involved in acting upon predisposing factors and selecting one political destination from several possibilities. The CPGB was also an actor. It failed to attract many whose environment and experience were similar to Crow's – but whose decisions regarding political affiliation were different. Nothing in Gall's account documents specific encounters with the CPGB which may have positively influenced Crow's choice of party, while the evidence for Gall's muted suggestion that Crow's father was 'a communist' is questionable. George Crow initially appears in the text as a docker and trade unionist (p.16). He reappears as '...a docker

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Cable Street and the fight against fascism, in the 1970s in Brick Lane, in order to make a more tangible connection between socialism and his locality' (p.26).

and then a Dagenham car worker, as well as trade unionist and communist...' (p.25). The source cited as authority for the statement that George was a 'communist', a matter highly relevant to his son's political formation, is a *Daily Mail* article which, when consulted, makes no reference to his politics.<sup>35</sup>

We need to know more about how and why Crow joined the CPGB, particularly in light of its possible consequences for his future trajectory. The same goes for his activities in the dozen or so years he remained a member of the CPGB and its successor. Gall observes that at the time: 'The Communist Party was a well-organised if declining force in the NUR as well as more widely' (p.22). Even at the peak of its trade union influence in the 1970s, the party's reach in the NUR was restricted. By 1983, the CPGB's industrial work was disintegrating and its membership had halved since 1970. When Crow joined, factionalism was approaching boiling point: it had erupted publically in the controversy over criticism of trade unions by a Eurocommunist in *Marxism Today* in late 1982. The group around the *Morning Star*, to which Crow, like many union activists, adhered, were incensed, claiming that such criticism provided ammunition for the Conservatives. Their political perspective pivoted on loyalty to what they perceived as indispensable allies, the union bureaucracy left and centre; and the centrality of militancy in resisting Thatcher and pushing unions and the Labour Party left.<sup>36</sup> What was important in the eyes of an architect of this approach, the CPGB's former industrial organiser, Bert Ramelson was:

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<sup>35</sup> The article cited in the book (p.25, note 59) is from the *Daily Mail*, 2 July 2011 and describes George Crow simply as a dock worker, car workers' workplace representative and 'a committed union activist'. For the impact of parents' membership of political parties on the political affiliations of their children, see, Philip Abrams and Alan Little, 'The Young Activist in British Politics', *British Journal of Sociology*, 16:2 (1965), pp.315-333; and Phil Cohen, *Children of the Revolution: Communist Childhood in Cold War Britain* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> For background, see Andrews, op cit., pp.183-191; Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhearn (eds), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London: Verso, 1981).

...what will move workers into action. For it is when workers are in action that they quickly draw political conclusions – much more quickly than from what may appear to them as abstract slogans...Many have learned important political lessons, including the nature of the State. A strategy that leads to that sort of involvement of masses of workers...far from being reformist is the very essence of a revolutionary strategy.<sup>37</sup>

Political demands filleted from the party's programme, *The British Road to Socialism* functioned as add-ons. What bound the package together and structured the activity of CPGB militants was faith in the power of economic mobilisation to drive political progress and raise political consciousness. Strikes allegedly attained a higher pedagogic level when they stimulated state intervention, although such intervention was a regular occurrence, with few dramatic results in augmenting consciousness, in an era when the state was a major employer and final arbiter of industrial relations. The engineering union leader and *Morning Star* partisan, Ken Gill, encapsulated this wish-fulfilment, when he claimed at the end of the 1970s: 'The wage battles that are growing will through militancy challenge contemporary capitalism...wages struggles are no longer *pure* wage struggles'.<sup>38</sup> In an inversion of Marxism, *trade unions* became the vanguard of the *political* struggle with the increasingly marginal CPGB, a surrogate for a revolutionary party, playing second fiddle. As evidence to the contrary mounted, Eurocommunists like Eric Hobsbawm experienced little difficulty in exposing this adaptation to trade unionism:

It has also been argued that [strikes] are political in the sense that they will, in some unspecified way, regenerate the political movement, broaden mass support for a socialist party and unify the working people. There is not so far much evidence for this...trade unionism is not enough, as Marxists have argued, ever since Karl Marx himself, against syndicalists and others of their kind. And the present phase of militancy is overwhelmingly trade unionist and economistic, mainly on the issue of wages.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bert Ramelson, 'The Strategy of Socialist Revolution in Britain', *Marxism Today*, October 1972, p.319.

<sup>38</sup> Gill's contribution to Jacques and Mulhearn, op cit., pp.21-22.

<sup>39</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Response' in Jacques and Mulhearn, op cit., pp.68-69.



There was truth in Crow's comment, although he may have been exaggerating, after all he was being interviewed by a long-time CPGB devotee, when he claimed in 2003 that the party had provided him with '...all my political understanding – it was a university education on its own' (p.23).<sup>40</sup> He did reject the CPGB's critical support for Labour, remarking in 2004: 'The only thing I disagree with the Communist Party on now is that they unequivocally support Labour' (p.41, note 64). This may imply, as Gall subsequently suggests, that Crow continued to subscribe to the Communist credo that socialism would develop from above, through parliamentary action and state ownership (pp.146-149). However, we cannot close the book on Crow's political formation by assigning a monopoly on his ideas to the CPGB. Future biographers will need to assess, for example, the alleged influence the SP had on his thinking in the last years of his life.<sup>41</sup> What does seem clear is that, if in a diluted way, his education in economism in the CPGB had an impact on his future career. A belief in industrial militancy remained at the heart of Crow's concerns. Gall reflects that:

Crow did not have a coherent understanding of the relationship between his industrial and political work or how trade union consciousness transmogrified into socialist consciousness...he did not consider what types of strike (political or economic, continuous or discontinuous, sectional or mass) in what situations and with what outcomes could lead to heightened consciousness. Indeed he generally over-estimated the impact of strikes upon consciousness and...showed little understanding of how the processes that inform consciousness, (such as cognitive liberation) unfold (p.151).

There are several points here. First, asserting that Crow was mistaken, Gall provides no indication of where Crow went wrong. There is no explanation as to what Gall himself considers the actual or desirable relationship of strikes to different forms of consciousness and the processes of 'cognitive liberation' within a Marxist perspective. Instead he refers readers in a footnote to a chapter in a book by Kelly which argues that Luxemburg's 1906

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<sup>40</sup> The interviewer was Andrew Murray; See Idem, *A New Labour Nightmare*, op cit., p.103; A partisan theme of this text is how much 21<sup>st</sup> century socialist union activists miss the CPGB's role in industry.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Taaffe, 'Bob Crow's Socialist Legacy', <http://www.socialismtoday.org/208/crow.html>.

analysis of mass strikes is applicable to modern Britain. For Kelly, conventional strikes do not foster revolutionary consciousness; but mass strikes which provoke state intervention and polarise society may.<sup>42</sup> In my estimation, he downplays the political limitations of mass strikes, which are essentially disruptive economic weapons, and diminishes the role of political agency in taking the working class forward in a pre-revolutionary situation and in facilitating reconstruction of a new revolutionary political authority. Insufficient emphasis is placed on the primacy of the political in favourably resolving crisis. Kelly does not ignore the need for a revolutionary party. But the accent is on strikes raising workers' consciousness and driving political progress, rather than who leads them and a revolution-making party, educating and directing citizens across society. The latter is particularly important in Britain. Luxemburg was writing in the context of an already existing mass party in Germany, attempting to convince it that revolution required mass mobilization in industry. In Britain no mass party exists. Its absence and importance require theoretical and practical prominence if the limitations of trade unionism are to be overcome. A key aspect of the party's role is to combat the embedded sectionalism and reformism of trade unionism and its tendency to compromise with the state; this may constitute a significant obstacle to progress in a crisis.

In contrast, Kelly surmises that in these circumstances union officials 'are much more likely to be advancing such struggles and promoting radical demands than in the past'.<sup>43</sup> Some may change in a crisis. As a generalisation this appears over-optimistic in relation to what history and theory teaches us about trade unionism and its custodians. As crisis develops, Kelly considers that: 'Trade unions will play an essential role in the process as the principal agents of working class mobilisation', while a powerful party depends on a speculative, future industrial conflagration.<sup>44</sup> The hope is that a revolutionary party 'emerges

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<sup>42</sup> Luxemburg, *Mass Strike*, op.cit; Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, op cit., p.127.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.183.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.304. For the limitations of such union action see Anderson, op cit., p.266.

from the radicalisation brought about by the next wave of strikes' rather than a strong basis having been previously assembled in day-to-day struggle - which might seem a necessary prerequisite for success in a future crisis. The leading role assigned to the unions appears questionable in terms of principle-moves towards revolution demand action and organisation across society beyond the employment relationship – and empirically – 75 per cent of workers and a higher proportion of young workers are not trade unionists.<sup>45</sup> Yet, the creation of a party powerful enough to decisively intervene across society appears to be left until the last minute and hinge problematically on a future strike wave stimulating a consequent explosion of consciousness. Relying on an unknowable future is hazardous and thirty years after the book's publication the next strike wave shows few signs of putting in an appearance. It is unclear whether Gall subscribes to Kelly's narrative but, this footnote apart, his own text tells us nothing of substance about strikes and consciousness.

Second, the absence of rigorous interviews with Crow on the subject of strikes and consciousness and the lack of first-hand statements of his ideas about it means we possess little direct evidence of his position. The only material substantiating Gall's assertion that Crow over-estimated the impact of strikes on consciousness cited in the book consists of two allegations in the *Evening Standard* and what Gall terms a 'TUC smear document' quoted in the same paper (pp.150-151). There is therefore, little empirical basis for Gall's claim.<sup>46</sup> Evidence elsewhere in the book suggests that, on the contrary, Crow fundamentally viewed strikes in conventional trade union terms as a means of improving the wages and conditions of his own members, as an ancillary, albeit an important one, to collective bargaining. RMT strikes were constitutional. They were typically tactical stoppages, engaging small numbers of workers and of brief duration. Conducted in an era of working class quiescence and the

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<sup>45</sup> See McIlroy, 'Strikes and Class Consciousness', op cit., pp.69-71.

<sup>46</sup> The TUC document was written in an attempt to undermine Crow's election prospects, allegedly by the former *Marxism Today* supporter, Mike Power.

decline of the strike, they were important in demonstrating the successful continuation and importance of proletarian combativity. They were not comparable with many major struggles of the past or the proliferation of unofficial action that reflected the rebellious culture of key industries in the post-war period. It is implausible to perceive them as having any significant autonomous impact on class consciousness, as distinct from militant trade union consciousness. They rarely challenged the institutionalisation of conflict. Gall states: ‘...the RMT under Crow’s leadership never took any industrial action without going through the process of declaring a dispute and engaging in negotiations’ (p.192), and one might add he never exceeded the boundaries of ‘industrial legality’ scrupulously abiding by collective agreements and the law.

Crow’s conception of industrial warfare was, in practice constitutional, sectional and confined to the RMT. Time and again he stressed the interests of his own members were paramount. True, he persistently called on the TUC to co-ordinate action by affiliates against state policy. But he was not prepared to campaign for strikes by RMT members without the *imprimatur* of Congress House for generalised strike action. When unions took such action across the public sector in 2011, only a handful of RMT members directly affected were balloted.<sup>47</sup> Crow personally supported the mobilisation and Gall comments that the RMT and Crow ‘could not have done more given its size and the fact that most of its members were not public sector workers’ (p.177). This misses the point about the importance from a Marxist perspective of *campaigning for solidarity action* with public sector workers.

Extolling Crow’s qualities of leadership, Gall remarks: ‘Applied to RMT members, the essential aspects of inspiration and encouragement concerned strike mobilisation strategy, thus boosting their self-confidence and collective power’ (p.218). This suggests that Crow’s leadership at best extended trade union consciousness. But on the evidence we have it is

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<sup>47</sup> There were votes for industrial action at the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, Tyne and Wear Metro and Orkney Ferries.

mistaken to picture Crow as simply continuing to practice the philosophy of economism he learned in the CPGB as a leader of the RMT. Ramelson and Gill insisted that the economic struggle would register gains in political class consciousness. We cannot infer a similar conviction from Crow's post-CPGB activities. Like many others, he seems to have peeled off the party's patina of politics and adapted further to militant trade unionism.

Gall convincingly demonstrates Crow's success in the economic sphere and the fruits of militancy in terms of stronger trade unionism, wage increases, membership growth, from 63,000 in 2002 to almost 84,000 in 2015, and more effective workplace organisation. But there was no progress towards amalgamation and industrial unionism and joint action with the other rail unions continued to be minimal. During his time at the helm Crow did not launch a debate about RMT investment in a long list of particularly unethical banks and companies. According to Gall, whose Marxist analysis remains muted, Crow's silence was 'pragmatic'. It ensured '...the union had the resources to fund its growth through the Organising and Recruitment Unit, as well as officers' salaries and pensions and membership benefits' (p.63). With regard to Crow's salary of £92,344 and employer's pension contribution of £35,585, Gall observes that 'compared to unions overall and unions of RMT's size, his remuneration was neither over-nor under generous' (p.135). And he goes on to note without critical comment: '[Crow] never contemplated taking "a worker's wage" – that is the average salary of his members – which would have been something like a third of his salary and was a key demand of socialists within unions' (p.135).

In a text which never elaborates on the role unions play in capitalist society, Gall does not address their bureaucratic nature. Instead, he reduces the issue to the conception of bureaucracy as embodied in a privileged, accommodative stratum. Citing two articles which defend the position of the SWP, he dismisses the idea in a paragraph (p.141). He neither cites

nor discusses the literature which presents a more persuasive interpretation of the issues.<sup>48</sup> Gall's critical Marxist analysis implies that bureaucracy is not a significant problem. In asserting that 'the likes of Crow' do not appear 'to be exceptions that prove the rule' (p.141), Gall presents half the picture, eliminating context and history. The fact that Crow operated in circumstances favourable to militant trade unionism meant that he never had to deal with the problems other union leaders have confronted when collective bargaining circumstances became unfavourable, power eroded and the pressure to accommodate and control members' aspirations intensified. Crow never had to face the adversity other left leaders encountered when the wheel of fortune and the balance of forces turned against militancy. Gall is uncritical about other aspects of Crow's behaviour with which many Marxists would take issue. Crow's support for an 11 per cent increase in MPs wages when millions of workers faced a 1 per cent pay cap imposed by a majority of MPs; his co-operation with the Murdoch press; and his advocacy of the death penalty – all pass without adverse comment.

### **Bob Crow: Labourism, Nationalism and Transforming the RMT**

He was more of a trade unionist than a Marxist. But two things marked him out. The first was a powerful antagonism to Labour which motivated him to preside over the RMT's break with the party in 2003-2004; the second was his persistent attempts to build a socialist alternative to Labour. I will look at each in turn. Crow seems to have viewed disaffiliation in terms of political principle, not as most Marxists have, as a matter of tactics, as part of a broader strategy to build a new party. He was determined to affiliate the RMT with other socialist groups, which he knew was impossible for the Labour leadership to accept. His starting, and largely his finishing point, was Labour's rightward trajectory: '...the Liberals are to the left of

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<sup>48</sup> See Hyman, 'Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism', op cit.; Richard Hyman, 'Will the Real Richard Hyman Please Stand Up?', *Capital and Class*, 36: 1 (2012), particularly, pp.155-157; McIlroy, 'Marxism and the Trade Unions', op cit.

Labour in the main'.<sup>49</sup> He did, albeit briefly, consider the possibility that the party could be changed by oppositional action only to reject the prospect: 'I suppose it is possible to turn Labour around. But it would be a hell of a job'.<sup>50</sup> There is even fragmentary evidence that Crow reflected on the problem in Marxist terms, although incompletely: 'Trade union politics are never going to be enough. As Lenin said, trade union politics are bourgeois politics'.<sup>51</sup> 'Agreed', Lenin might have responded, 'but the immediate task remains to work within the Labour Party, the trade unions and other institutions and movements to assemble the forces to organisationally and politically transcend those bourgeois politics'. Gall neither examines Labourism through the lens of Marxist analysis nor critically scrutinises Crow's solution to it. After quoting an RMT official who opined, with considerable foresight, that the RMT was heading for the political wilderness, Gall approbates the RMT's initiative: 'It was a brave move by the RMT, articulated and ultimately led by Crow, to allow individual branches in Scotland to affiliate to the SSP, given likely expulsion from Labour...' (p.72).

On the contrary, there are good reasons for believing that the move was misguided. There existed appreciable discontent among RMT activists with New Labour, while its policies on rail, fanned frustration. But Crow and his supporters do not appear to have mounted meaningful overtures to muster other unions unhappy with Blair – the FBU, the Communications Workers, even Unite – for a fight *within* Labour; or to prepare the foundations for an alternative if such a struggle proved unsuccessful. Forging even a small united front would have been difficult in view of the entrenched, critical loyalty and sectional approach of most Labour affiliates. Transforming Labour required a long-term perspective, transcending immediate reactions. That meant staying in and eschewing temptations like the

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Murray, *A New Labour Nightmare*, op cit., p.109.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., Again it is relevant that Crow was speaking to a then Communist - although Murray was a CPB Labour loyalist who joined the Labour Party in the wake of Corbyn's success. None of the above statements are cited by Gall.

adventure with the few thousand strong SSP. This was not a palatable prospect. But what was the alternative? The SLP provided a cautionary tale. Together with the FBU, the only other union to defect, the RMT commanded 125,000 members and a handful of activists. The only other possibilities as backers for a new party were the groups to Labour's left: they were tiny, in decline, sectarian and appeared, at best, quarrelsome prospective partners. All this was predictable, and predicted, in 2003-2004.<sup>52</sup>

The proof of the pudding was in the eating. It was four years after the RMT had been disaffiliated before No2EU was launched in 2008. What political influence the RMT exercised between 2004 and Crow's death hinged, not on EU2 or TUSC, but on the group of Labour MPs which the union continued to finance. The RMT remained firmly within the orbit of Labourism. But it had deprived itself of the strongest advantage Labourism offered: the right to be represented on party bodies and the right to participate in party decisions. The reality was that the RMT had sacrificed its institutional and political role in a party of government and potential government for a fleeting flirtation with a left nationalist group. By 2006, the SSP was in what proved to be terminal crisis.<sup>53</sup>

It is difficult to agree with Gall's benign estimation of the episode: '...the RMT broke with Labour to adopt a multi-pronged political strategy of working with Labour MPs...and a number of other leftwing forces. This showed more political nuance and acumen that was commonly recognised...' (pp.79-80).<sup>54</sup> Rather it represented a step backwards which enhanced sectionalism: even the RMT's sister unions on the railways, ASLEF and the TSSA remained affiliated to Labour. The RMT turned away from the expression of a general trade

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<sup>52</sup> For similar arguments, see my article, John McIlroy, 'Radical Political Trade Unionism Reassessed', *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 18, 3 (2012), pp.251-258.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> See, also, Crow's own justificatory statement, 'Labour and the Trade Unions', *Scottish Left Review*, 79 (2013), pp.16-17. It was intriguing that one of the few unions capable of still mounting effective sectional industrial militancy should turn to sectional trade union politics.



union interest within capitalism embodied in the affiliation of a majority of trade unionists to the Labour Party. Gall's verdict glosses over the fact that the RMT had regressed a hundred years to the situation prior to the establishment of the Labour Party, when unions went their own way and depended for political influence on relations with individual MPs. Had it wished, the RMT could have maintained its affiliation to Labour *and* strengthened its Parliamentary group of MPs. There is no suggestion that the latter performed better after 2004 than before. Gall's reference to 'other leftwing forces' presumably refers to No2EU and TUSC: as illustrated elsewhere in his book these projects achieved very little. The RMT also formed links with the Greens and SNP MPs – questionably leftwing forces – whose successes on the RMT's behalf are not spelt out here. Crow's 'political nuance and acumen' are not readily discernible in his dealings with the Labour Party.

Crow's allies offered a justification of sorts. In the SP's estimation, Blair's adoption of neoliberalism and rewriting of Clause IV, for many the socialist heart of Labour's constitution meant that what Lenin had characterised as a bourgeois workers' party had degenerated into just another bourgeois party.<sup>55</sup> This assessment confused a real change in the balance between 'bourgeois' and 'workers', a move along the spectrum by Labour – from very mild reformism under Neil Kinnock to even milder reformism under Blair – with political and sociological transformation. Despite its turn to neoliberalism, Labour remained the party of the unions – that was what had impressed Lenin. Radicalism – as well as moderation – in the unions could flow into the party – and vice versa. Organically imbricated with Labour, affiliated unions were still strongly represented in the party's policy-making structures. They could change its political course and leading personnel – if, and it was a big 'if', but a 'democratic 'if', they decided they wanted to. The difficulty lay first of all within

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Taaffe, 'The Role of the RMT in Changing Labour', <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/25598>. By 2009, Crow was affirming 'Labour is finished. Some say the party can still be changed but Labour can't be changed' (p.56).

the unions and only then within the party, while Labour retained the often grudging allegiance of most workers. Assertions of transformation were also bound up with illusions about the party's past radicalism, as well as identification of decisive change in Labour's DNA with its expulsion of *Militant*, the SP's predecessor, in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>56</sup> Those who argued that space remained for the left to continue oppositional activity, that things could still be changed, were to be partly vindicated by events.

Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour leader in 2015 turned the page. A new narrative was confirmed by his re-election the following year, by an influx of newcomers and returnees which saw membership reach 550,000 and by Labour's programme in the 2017 general election, which broke, albeit in a small way, with the neoliberal settlement ratified by New Labour.<sup>57</sup> It would not do to exaggerate and the view that 'Marxism is everywhere in modern Labour' is hardly a half-truth.<sup>58</sup> If events provided a rebuff to reaction within Labour and British society, the party remained divided, the rightwing retained control over the apparatus and was strongly represented at conference and on the executive. The majority of MPs remained un-reconciled to more than moderate radicalism and Corbyn has done much to appease them. The battle is undecided – which affirms the Labour Party as a tremendously important site for socialist intervention. In that context, the RMT's trajectory appears more than ever isolationist, premature and parochial. Cheering on the Labour left and supporting Corbyn from outside with no votes to make such support meaningful, the union's leaders are currently consulting with branches as to whether the RMT should reaffiliate to Labour.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Michael Crick, *Militant* (London: Biteback, 2016); Peter Taaffe, *Rise of Militant* (London: Militant Publications, 1995) Idem, "'Militant' by Michael Crick Reissued', [http://socialistpartyofscotland.org.uk/2016/04/18/militant\\_michael\\_crick](http://socialistpartyofscotland.org.uk/2016/04/18/militant_michael_crick)

<sup>57</sup> Richard Seymour, *The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* (London: Verso, 2016); Nigel Cawthorne, *Jeremy Corbyn: Leading From The Left* (London: Endeavour Press, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Paul Mason, *Guardian*, 26 September 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Taaffe, 'Bob Crow's Socialist Legacy', op cit; *Labour Research*, October 2017, p.12.

To return to our second point: how successful were Crow's attempts to begin to build a socialist alternative to Labour? Gall does not discuss the arguments about constructing a new party on a Marxist basis; or alternatively starting with a broader-based formation in which Marxists would work alongside left reformists in the hope of eventually moving towards a revolutionary party.<sup>60</sup> Crow's thoughts are not recorded, but it is reasonable to infer from his actions that he favoured a broad-based option. It remains unclear whether he perceived this as 'a halfway house' or a relatively finished instrument of socialist advance. Gall seems on firm ground when he points out that Crow recognised that creating a new party (programme and structure undefined) would be a prolonged and difficult process and that he '...had no idea of how this would happen nor a strategy to achieve it' (p.156). On Taaffe's account, discussions took place on making a start on a broad-based organisation. However, they foundered on Crow's insistence that the SP would have to give up its organisation and press.<sup>61</sup> When discussions eventually resumed with the CPB and SP, they appear to have focussed on a compromise between the three participants which involved 'a halfway house' to 'a halfway house'.

No2EU was a one-trick pony: a one-issue reformist platform, kitted out with abstract socialist rhetoric. Its roots stretched back to the Stalinist rehabilitation of nationalism during the popular front era from 1935, which had been reinforced during the Second World War. Revived in the Communists' fight for British 'independence' from America and the *British Road to Socialism* during the early Cold War, it was revamped in conjunction with the 'little

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<sup>60</sup> Despite the absence of any explicit discussion of this question in relation to Crow's ideas, Gall cites the SSP as '...providing a model for how others could organise elsewhere in Britain' (p.73). The animators of the SSP, who enjoyed the support of a majority, originated in *Militant* but split from that organisation. However, factional rights in the SSP were accorded to the Scottish supporters of the SP and the SWP, who had their own platforms. But there is some partial evidence that Crow did not see this as a model form of organisation in England and Wales – see note 57.

<sup>61</sup> Taaffe, 'Bob Crow's Socialist Legacy', op cit.

Englander' Labour left to inform the reactionary left-wing opposition to the Common Market in the 1960s and 1970s. The new enterprise came straight out of the CPB playbook, although it also had roots in Bennism and the *Tribune* group. Despite his antipathy to Labourism and his break with Communism, Crow continued to indulge the nationalism the two purveyed. Few would dispute that the EU had evolved as an undemocratic vehicle for consolidating social neoliberalism or that its current rules would cause problems if, at some point in the future, British workers began implementing socialist policies. But such a future threat to socialist advance in Britain was perennial and likely to stem directly from the major EU member states and the USA, rather than the EU bureaucracy, unless those states themselves came under assault from French, German and other European workers. In 2008, anxiety about the EU Commission or courts derailing New Labour measures as 'socialist' were imaginary; and, in 2014, with the Coalition government, irrelevant. Even Corbyn's manifesto commitments to extend public ownership and increase state expenditure were unlikely to be struck down by Brussels. The No2EU platform was centred on future prospects for socialism in Britain while marginalising the inconvenient fact that any significant and durable moves towards socialism would have to develop across national boundaries.<sup>62</sup>

The campaign's pivotal demand, 'exiting the EU on the basis of socialist policies', suppressed the healthier alternative, a campaign to democratise the EU and change its policies, and it neglected unpalatable realities. It evaded the fact that the EU reflected the consensus view of its neoliberal constituent states; that the primary obstruction to developing socialist politics in Britain, as in other European countries, was not the EU but global capitalism and the condition of the working class internationally; that the prevailing balance

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<sup>62</sup> No2EU's politics were presented inter alia by Robert Griffiths, 'New Left Openings?', *Morning Star*, 9 April 2009; Clive Heemskerk, 'Why Socialists Oppose the EU', *The Socialist*, 20 May 2009; Bob Crow, 'Why You Should Back No2EU', *Morning Star*, 6 March 2014; Clive Heemskerk, 'EU Referendum', *Socialism Today*, July-August 2015; Hannah Sell, 'The Single Market: a Neoliberal Tool of the Bosses', *The Socialist*, 23 August 2017.

of class forces in Britain and beyond, which needed to be transcended before any question of external obstruction arose, was extremely unfavourable; that far from constituting the key to solving these difficulties, in the context of Euro-scepticism and nationalism in Britain, any leftwing campaign would find it difficult to avoid feeding into the discourse that the EU was the fount of workers' problems and providing sustenance to anti-immigrant and 'little England' prejudice; that in 2008, in 2014 or today, any secession from the EU would be on a reactionary capitalist basis; and that divisions detonated in the capitalist class and its political representatives about exit would be purchased at the cost of intensified divisions in the working class.

These points have been underlined by the unfolding of Brexit. Recent events confirm that the EU is the least of the impediments to socialism in Britain and that British workers possess no interest whatsoever in siding with sections of British capitalism against the European variant. They are better placed to improve their position and work towards the future together with European workers; and it is highly arguable that in that context the EU provides a superior, if far from perfect framework for organising solidarity than an 'independent' British capitalism. Put to the test, No2EU proved marginal. In the 2009 European elections, with Crow heading its London list, it received 1 per cent of the national vote and in 2014, 0.2 per cent of the national vote (pp.87-88). The venture raises fundamental questions about Crow's left nationalist politics. But Gall provides no corrective beyond the terse comment: '[No2EU's] failure was attributed by some on the left to attacking the wrong target, namely the EU and not capitalism, the Tories and austerity...' (p.88).

TUSC likewise, fell far short of Crow's aspiration to lay the foundations for a party and likewise revealed no new politics beyond the confines of left Labourism. Whereas the CPB had been Crow's main partner in No2EU – although the SP finally came on board – Taaffe's Trotskyists became the dominant active force in TUSC. Established to contest

elections on the reasoning that Labour no longer represented British workers, TUSC's dismal election results simply confirmed the resilience of Labour. In the 2010 general election, its 42 candidates attracted 0.1 per cent of the vote and in 2015, 135 candidates attracted 36,420 votes (p.90). The coalition maintained its position of standing against Labour in the 2017 local government elections – prompting the defection of the SWP; but it agreed to stand down its candidates in the 2017 general election 'in order to get rid of the Conservatives and put Jeremy Corbyn in No.10'.<sup>63</sup> It was an objective that might have been better pursued inside the radicalising Labour Party.

Gall brackets the NSSN together with the earlier projects under 'Political Initiatives' (p.83). It justified that designation only in the loosest sense: it was an attempt to bring together lay representatives across the unions and link them with left officials. The NSSN was supported by the RMT, PCS, FBU, the Bakers' Union and the Journalists, Prison Officers and Probation Officers' Unions.<sup>64</sup> It was compromised by a self-denying ordinance that it would not criticise union leaders (p.85), a negation of the rebellious DNA of any healthy rank and file movement. Nonetheless, it played a welcome role in organising solidarity with strikes and co-ordinating support for motions which found their way onto TUC agendas. Despite the withdrawal of the SWP and some independent socialists in a dispute over support for anti-cuts organisations, the NSSN was, perhaps, the most successful of Crow's ventures.<sup>65</sup> This did not detract from the fact that taken as a whole, his attempts to begin to build a socialist alternative to Labour were strategically misguided and yielded minimal success.

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<sup>63</sup> <http://www.tusc.org.uk/about>; <http://www.tusc.org.uk/policy.php>; Taaffe, 'The Role of the RMT in Changing Labour', op cit.

<sup>64</sup> Taaffe, 'Bob Crow's Socialist Legacy', op cit; [http://shopstewardsnet/about\\_the\\_nssn](http://shopstewardsnet/about_the_nssn)

<sup>65</sup> It is, however, a little exaggerated to conclude that it took '...important steps to broaden the agenda of trade unionism by making common cause with a range of social movements': Connolly and Darlington, 'Radical Political Unionism', op cit., p.240.

The final question I want to take up in this section is the extent to which Crow's leadership helped transform the RMT, its activists and its members in both industrial and political terms. Given the liberality with which the term 'political' is bandied about in relation to trade unionism, it is important to repeat at the outset that conventional Marxism recognises an institutional and ideological separation between 'the economic' (trade unions, bargaining over labour power, trade union politics) and 'the political' (class consciousness, revolutionary politics). The economic transmutes into the political only in times of tumult and crisis as workers transcend trade unionism. But in periods of capitalist stability revolutionary ideas may take root, cadres may be assembled, the foundations of a revolutionary party may be laid and bridges may be thrown across the divide. To what degree did Crow's leadership, exercised in distinctly non-revolutionary times, help to overcome to some degree the gap between the economic and political so that the union was able to '...prosecute members' material (principally economic) interests in the direction of socialist change' (p.2)? There is confusion at the heart of Gall's argument about this central question. On the one hand, he claims – undeniably on the evidence – that 'Crow was unable to create a substantial new socialist political force, unite existing socialist parties, return rail or bus transport to public ownership...' (p.228) – which, it has to be said, is setting the bar rather high. And he emphasises – and this too, seems indisputable - that Crow 'recorded greater success in the industrial than the political arenas' (p.231-232). Yet Gall also contends – and this is very much against the grain of the evidence - that Crow successfully mobilised RMT activists in 'a common political project' and created 'political congruence' in the RMT. According to Gall, 'political congruence' is achieved:

...when alignment occurs between the values, aspirations, expectations and desired outcomes of leaders, activists and members. It is manifest in a common political project which is likely to bring about strategic renewal...comprising shared political frames of reference and collective identity, participation and socialisation...a political project...transformative in nature...found agreeable by most members (pp.10-11).

There are several problems with this concept. Despite its breadth – even greater if Gall’s definition was to be quoted in full – the *political* content of political congruence remains nebulous. Gall is writing within ‘a critical Marxist perspective’. Readers might, therefore, reasonably assume that political congruence, a common political project, involves turning militants into socialists, moving the union in ‘a socialist direction’, and beginning to transcend economism. On the contrary, all the indicators of political congruence which are specified in Gall’s introductory discussion are industrial, trade unionist, economic viz: ‘Putting moves towards militancy together with increased membership and membership participation, in one particular form of union renewal and revitalisation, especially when directed by the national union leadership and deployed as an “organising strategy” to create more assertive and powerful workplace unionism’ (p.11). There is nothing ‘political’ about this in Marxist or even in conventional bourgeois terms. It is little different from the formulaic approaches to ‘union renewal and revitalisation’ put forward by the TUC or AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Moreover, the requirement that this ‘common political project’ should be found ‘agreeable by most members’ is an extremely dilute stipulation: surely a critical Marxist or even a full-blooded democratic approach, demands engagement not acquiescence, activity not passivity.

Nothing more is heard about ‘political congruence’ after its announcement under ‘Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches’ (pp.10-11) – apart from a disproportionate reflection about the absence of a broad left and the RMT’s small and homogenous nature ‘suggesting the creation of political congruence’ (p.207) - until we reach the book’s conclusion where we are told that political congruence has indeed been created. There Gall underlines Crow’s success in mobilising members in industrial disputes. He comments:



Even though the relationship between mobilisation and political congruence was not a simple one of cause and effect, the process of mobilisation was predicated upon political congruence, whereby Crow was the pivotal element in an informal network that (democratically) captured control of the RMT, establishing a hegemony of militancy (by creating common norms and expectations as a form of consciousness across the different sections of the union) and instituting a united, non-factionalised national leadership' (p.232).

The common political project and political congruence involve the RMT's leaders, activists and members coming together on the basis of a shared subscription to the hegemony of industrial militancy and a shared militant trade union consciousness – not a shared belief in replacing capitalism with socialism and a shared political class consciousness.<sup>66</sup> This generalised belief in industrial militancy facilitated the RMT's success in industrial mobilisation – not political mobilisation. Under the rhetoric about common political projects, it becomes clear that on the whole, Crow created a militant union, but he did not imbue activists and its members with political class consciousness. This interpretation is given substance when Gall's next paragraph commences: '*Out of the achievement of political congruence* came union renewal and revitalisation in terms of membership growth, bargaining leverage and outcomes, and militant political stances...Politically less was achieved in terms of membership subscription and participation' (p.232, emphasis added). There seems to be little that is political about political congruence: as it figures in this book, 'political' is a misnomer. Apart from the vague 'militant political stances', political congruence and a common political project are reduced to little more than the willingness of RMT activists and members to strike over industrial grievances. Marxists have struggled for centuries in trade unions and beyond to transform the economic into the political. Gall

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<sup>66</sup> Earlier in the book Gall states '[Crow's] intellectual framework chimed with the consciousness of activists and active members who were not of revolutionary socialist consciousness' (p.152). The implication would again appear to be that the 'political' project Crow shared with RMT activists was the realisation of industrial militancy based on trade union consciousness.

resolves the problem by negating a distinction fundamental to Marxism and dissolving the political into the economic. We have travelled some way from critical Marxism.

The idea that Crow and his supporters could win a majority of RMT activists and members for their politics in prevailing conditions was unlikely – leaving aside the inadequacies of those politics. But some progress was possible. However, there is scant evidence that any significant section of members or even most activists shared Crow's *political* project, embodied in No2EU and TUSC – still less acted upon it – in Gall's book – or elsewhere. The degree to which political congruence – if we give words their plain meaning - developed was minimal. When Crow was elected general secretary some two-thirds of RMT members did not participate (p.56). When his successor was elected in 2014, despite the alleged achievement of political congruence, the percentage of members abstaining increased to around 75 per cent (p.234). Almost two-thirds of RMT members failed to vote in the statutory ballot on maintenance of a political fund without which the RMT would have been unable to undertake political activity of any kind. The number of RMT members exercising their right to opt out of paying into the political fund, even after a democratic vote for its maintenance, increased (p.205).<sup>67</sup> On the evidence available to us, RMT members' endorsement, still less active engagement with No2EU and TUSC was restricted – in relation to the former 'only a minority of RMT branches' were involved (p.90, n.46). Gall claims that activists and members shared a common political project with Crow. But he also claims when discussing No2EU and TUSC that 'without data, the most likely scenario is that Crow's appeal was confined to those who were already activists' (p.205) and that '...at local and regional levels the RMT was pretty much the start and finish of most activists' horizons' (p.219).

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<sup>67</sup> For similar points, see McIlroy, 'Radical Political Trade Unionism Reassessed', op cit., pp.255-256.

While Crow was alive, I wrote about these problems emphasising that despite the RMT leadership's admirable prosecution of industrial militancy, the gulf between the economic and political that entrenched, intractable and, for Marxists, disabling feature of labour history had not been bridged in the RMT – let alone more widely:

There is no evidence that the stoppages that have occurred produced recruits to TUSC or socialist groups in any appreciable numbers...In the absence of examples, it may be concluded that we have not progressed from previous periods of militancy or the position where mobilisation remains on the terrain of industrial problems – not activists political radicalism – and makes few political converts...The reality may be closer than we would like to think to the quotidian economism of Communist Party shop stewards and their membership or a CP-dominated union such as DATA/TASS several decades ago. The RMT may still reflect, as British trade unionism historically has, a fissure among members between militancy, on the one hand, and allegiance to electoral politics and mainstream parties, usually Labour, on the other.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

The lessons we can derive from the experience of one leader of one small union in advantageous, industrial circumstances are important but, in relation to socialist progress in the labour movement, limited. Gall's attempt to provide a critical Marxist analysis suffers from the dearth of primary materials and the embargo on sources which might have yielded greater insights into Crow's thinking about trade unionism and socialism; the adoption of an analytical framework which is, at times, abstract and at times, attenuated in relation to Marxist theories of trade unionism; and the application of industrial relations theories in a fashion which in some instances does not greatly advance our understanding and, in the case of 'political congruence', proves more confusing than illuminating.

Gall registers persuasive conclusions about Crow's political initiatives, and his failure to fuse trade unionism and socialist politics, without subjecting them to fundamental critique and sometimes excuses Crow's failings in a fashion questionable in the most elastic Marxism. For example, he states, as noted earlier, that Crow lacked '...a coherent understanding of the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.256.

relationship between his industrial and his political work in pursuit of socialism, or how trade union consciousness transmogrified into socialist consciousness' (p.150). But the book itself suffers from an absence of any explicit explanation. It offers no elaboration of the relationship between trade union consciousness and socialist consciousness – or exactly what Crow failed to comprehend. A couple of pages later, Gall is claiming that what most critical Marxists would consider to be a significant deficiency on Crow's part did not matter in relation to the problems he directly confronted:

...in the fight for better material conditions and against neoliberalism, it mattered little that Crow was from one far Left background, rather than another, or that his view on transforming workers into agents for socialism was underdeveloped. It might have mattered had the radical Left been much stronger, if the struggle for socialism was at an advanced stage or if society had been in a pre-revolutionary situation. For Crow – given that none of these were the case, what was more important was his steadfastness of belief and his professing them (sic) widely and frequently... (p.152).

Leaving aside the suggestion that Crow's political background mattered little to his behaviour as a union leader, a claim the evidence, appears to contradict, such comments highlight a danger that Marxists accept a dichotomy between the struggle today, for material improvement and against neoliberalism, and the struggle in the future, when things are more advanced. Only at some indeterminate point in the future does turning militants into Marxists and a developed understanding of the relationship between trade union and class consciousness become relevant. The implication is that militant reformist trade unionism is sufficient in the present. Making socialists remains a task for tomorrow in an advanced or pre-revolutionary situation. What is missing in this calculus is how we get from the present and the fight for better conditions to that more advanced or pre-revolutionary position.

Incubating an economic/political split, and passing over human agency in a fashion foreign to most Marxists, the above-quoted reflections neglect the simple point that what socialists do today – in terms of propaganda, agitation and organisation, however small,

however carefully calibrated in relation to current circumstances – may influence what they can do in the future. It may contribute incrementally to socialist advance, on the one hand, or continuing resistance to the symptoms of the system, on the other. Even those who rely over much on events, appreciate the significance of agency in taking advantage of events. The ideas and organisation necessary to do this will not magically appear like a rabbit out of a conjurer's hat, in a crisis. They require developing in the here and now

The wider lessons Gall draws from examining Crow are largely confined to labour market relations: 'What he achieved within the RMT on industrial relations matters could not be replicated within the wider union movement, especially as the RMT was so small and idiosyncratic, and few union members had the power of RMT members' (p.227). This constitutes a useful antidote to the mechanical approach of some industrial relations academics: they detect signs of union revival in specific circumstances and pronounce them transferable to more difficult environments. We may, however, nuance Gall's conclusion and observe: 'Effective leadership may maximise potential in unpromising territory. A circumscribed plea for imaginative leadership and calculative militancy in other sectors, for wider strategies tailored to distinctive milieu and a particular balance of forces may stem from consideration of rail'.<sup>69</sup> But that is not all we can learn. The primary point is that trade unionism, however militant, is not enough. It is not necessarily a road to political radicalisation and class consciousness – witness the RMT. We should emphasise its importance in organising workers, softening exploitation and sustaining combativity towards capital. We should stop investing it with a significance it does not possess in propelling participants towards class politics and anti-capitalism. This is particularly important at a time when capitalism is at the crossroads and the inability of the subjective factor to challenge it demands rigorous evaluation.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.257.

Crow was a tireless fighter who believed in class struggle, endeavoured to go beyond trade unionism and attempted to expand the horizons of trade unionists. He highlighted the organisation and ownership of the railways, campaigned for their renationalisation and sought to unify the interests of producers and consumers. He exploited his position to criticise capitalism and propagandise for socialism. He struggled to find a path to class politics. In practice, he prioritised trade unionism and, to paraphrase Lenin, ‘allowed the organisation of economic indictments to constitute his predominant activity’.<sup>70</sup> In that sense, he emulated most left-wing union leaders through the twentieth century. Like them, he suffered severely from the absence of a meaningful revolutionary party and any rigorous conception of its role. Together with Scargill, he exceeded the efforts of his post-war predecessors in his dogged pursuit of alternatives to Labourism. But like Scargill, whose excesses he did not share, Crow enjoyed little success in this field. His significance lay in keeping socialist ideas and aspirations on the agenda in an era of rampant capitalism, working class retreat, depleted consciousness and bureaucratic manoeuvring. On the whole, he did this imperfectly. He accepted the sectional conventions of British trade unionism. He never ‘interfered’ in the affairs of other unions and was far from an active crusader for democracy and solidarity in action. He never called for the election of officials in principle or questioned their salaries. He opposed the ‘worker’s wage’ demand when other leaders in the FBU and PCS at least acknowledged its relevance. His sense of political strategy and his vision of socialism were impaired by the commonsense of trade unionism and the baggage he carried over from the CPGB.

To his credit, Crow left a stronger union, a more self-confident membership, a vigorous culture of combativity. He remained within the confines of left-reformism. Strikes were perceived in essentially trade union terms. Sometimes utilised to raise issues about

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<sup>70</sup> Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, op cit., p.46.

running the railways, there is little evidence of their consistent employment as a forum for political agitation to convince strikers of the need for political action or the need to support TUSC. The activities of the RMT, No2EU and TUSC were generally, although not completely, conducted in discrete spheres. Crow had no clear conception of the revolutionary party or how to build it, or how to diminish the distance between trade union consciousness and political class consciousness. Despite his admirable qualities, his determination and courage, and the constraints engendered by a period of working class quiescence, he more closely resembled Lenin's 'trade union leader', Robert Knight, than his 'tribune of the people', Wilhelm Liebknecht, 'more engaged in the revolutionary illumination of the whole system'.<sup>71</sup> Gall ends his book with comments from activists in other trade unions who reflect: "If only our union had someone like him leading us...I wish I could join the RMT" (p.239). Gall concludes: 'Those are surely the best eulogies any union leader could hope for' (ibid.). A union leader perhaps; a communist/socialist tribune of the people deserves to be judged in 'a political biography' by more exacting standards.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp.746-747. It would be simplistic and ahistorical to assimilate Crow to the radical Liberal, Knight, the leader of the Boilermakers' Union. But as Lih observes, *Lenin Rediscovered*, op cit., p.408, citing the Webbs: '[Knight] seems to have done very well for the 40,000 or so members of his union by an impressive, disciplined and organised application of collective bargaining. Knight is, thus, a strong example of an effective trade union leader. Nevertheless, from a Social-Democratic point of view, his activities benefitted only a small group of workers and not the class as a whole'.